





Awakening Augusta

Cindy Spencer Pape

Regency Scotland can be a lonely place, but Augusta MacLeish has four mischievous younger siblings for company – now if she only had money to feed them! Colin Fordyce has recently inherited an earldom, along with five wards in a remote Scottish castle. When he travels to meet them, he discovers his predecessor was skimming their funds. He also learns the oldest Miss MacLeish is absolutely stunning. A knock to his head leaves him seeing two of the buxom beauty, just as one kiss from her tempting lips leaves him longing for more.

A night spent together forces Colin and Augusta to marry, leaving them all the opportunity in the world to explore the sexual hunger between them. Colin delights in teaching Augusta all the pleasures of the flesh, awakening the wanton lover beneath her ladylike veneer. From Scotland to London, the flames burning between them refuse to be doused, and oh how they will set the Ton on fire.

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Dedication

As always, I couldn't do this without the support and encouragement of my own sometimes-kilted hero, my husband Glenn. Further supporting me are my sons Chandler and Tristan and my father, Phillip Spencer, who all help keep me going on a daily basis. In addition, I have to thank Anny and Regina, critique partners extraordinaire, for encouraging me to venture into the realm of historical romance — one

I've loved since I gobbled up books by Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland as a kid. Finally, I need to send a shout out to Desirée, who amazes me daily with her strength and courage in the face of adversity. Hugs, honey, this one's for you.

Chapter One

Scottish Lowlands, 1807

"Does everyone have everything?" Augusta MacLeish stood beside the wagon that held her four younger siblings and studied their faces. "It's a long way to make poor Thomas come back if you've forgotten your favorite hair ribbons." She stared hard at thirteen-year-old Alberta at that. Bertie was forever forgetting things. Thomas McArdle, their lone male servant, winked at her from the driver's box.

"You checked my bag yourself, Gussie," Bertie replied. "Can we go now?"

"Arthur, you have your indoor shoes, right? No wearing your muddy boots inside Lady Carter's parlor."

"Yes, Gus," twelve-year-old Arthur, the baby of the family, said with a long-suffering sigh. "We're fine. And if we don't go now we'll miss luncheon."

The Carters' estate was a two-hour ride in the farm cart, which was all the MacLeishes had left in the way of transportation. The carriage had been sold within months of their father's death, some three years back.

"We'll be fine." At sixteen, Alexandra was blossoming into a beauty, with big blue eyes, long slender limbs and blonde hair that hung in shining waves to her waist. She was also the one usually at the center of any mischief the four of them got up to. "I'll take care of them."

Augusta managed not to roll her eyes. "No pranks. It is uncommonly generous of Lady Carter to invite all of you for the week. Do not embarrass yourselves." Sir James and Lady Carter were the only members of local society who still bothered to include the impoverished MacLeish children in their invitations, even if Arthur was officially

Viscount Cairnwyck. Since Lady Carter had been a dear friend of Augusta's stepmother and the Carter children ran the same gamut of ages as the younger MacLeishes, the two families had always been very close. Still, it was kind of the Carters to ask them all to Sylvester's fourteenth birthday party.

"You should come too, Gussie," said fifteen-year-old Antonia, looking up from her book. Her dark eyes were clouded behind her spectacles. "I worry about you here alone in the castle."

"She can't," Lexie replied. "Vicar Ellsworth will be there and he'll have his grubby paws all over her."

Augusta sighed. Lexie, bless her, didn't miss a trick. But as she was now getting close to marriageable age herself, she needed to learn to mind her manners.

"I'm looking forward to some time alone, anyway," she assured Toni, quite honestly. Besides, she'd cut the last of her stepmother's dresses down to fit Lexie's burgeoning figure. There was nothing left to make decent party clothes out of for Augusta as well. Thomas' wife Margaret, their housekeeper, was going along to act as servant for the girls, so Augusta would have Cairnwyck Castle all to herself for seven whole days. Taking care of only herself would really be quite a luxury.

"I promise, I'll be fine," she repeated, drawing her shawl closer around her shoulders. "Have a wonderful time and give my love to the Carters."

She stood by the drawbridge and waved as the cart rolled away.

* * * * *

Two days later, Augusta walked the four miles back from the village with a scowl on her face. The letter from her guardian's solicitor fairly burned a hole through her pocket. There would be no funds arriving this quarter-day. None. Except for the pittance she and Margaret made selling eggs and butter, the MacLeish family would have nothing at all on which to survive. She shivered despite the warmth of the sunny May evening.

"Damn and blast!" Disastrous times called for disastrous words and it wasn't as if anyone were around to hear her anyway. "I'm going to have to knuckle under and marry the bloody vicar." Which wouldn't be so awful if he hadn't been forty-five, balding and pockmarked. And if he didn't live with his sister who despised Augusta

with every fiber of her being. Still, the odious man would at least make sure the children were fed, and that was the most important thing.

She crossed the moat on the rickety footbridge, having left the big drawbridge up while she was gone. There was an ominous cracking sound under her foot as she reached the end and she jumped to the next board before she could fall through. "Damn again!" She'd have to have Thomas replace that board first thing. It was a good thing there were fallen trees on the property and she'd traded half the lumber for running one through the local sawmill last spring. Nails, however, might be a trick. Castle Cairnwyck, for all its former glory, was out of almost everything.

"Ho, there!"

Augusta had been so caught up in her worries she hadn't even heard the horse that rounded the curve in the lane behind her. She'd just stepped onto the path at the end of the bridge, but at the man's voice, she swung around in confusion. Who could this possibly be? It wasn't anyone she knew, so he had to be a random traveler, asking for directions. Or something. She shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked out across the moat.

"Good afternoon." Politeness was bred into her, even though her heart leapt with a small frisson of fear. She was completely alone here and this was a young, powerful man on an even more powerful steed. Without her spectacles, which had broken last month, she couldn't see much more than that – and even his relative youth was a guess based on voice and the easy way he handled the massive horse.

"I'm here to speak with Miss MacLeish. Is she at home?" He stopped his horse directly across the bridge from Augusta, allowing her to see him a bit more clearly. He wore a blue coat, buff trousers and gleaming black boots, any one piece of which probably cost more than her annual butcher's bill. Augusta, on the other hand, was wearing a four-year-old pelisse that had been let out twice and mended a dozen times. Of course he thought she was a servant.

"I don't believe she is receiving callers," Augusta replied primly. "Can I tell her who's asking?"

"Bruxton," the man replied haughtily. "I am the lady's guardian."

Augusta felt all the blood drain from her face and she swayed on her feet. Lord Bruxton?

The man who had ignored them since their father's death and squandered all their funds? What could he want now? Surely, he wasn't here to take the children? She took two steps backward to lean on the castle wall so she didn't fall over.

"What the —" Lord Bruxton kicked his horse across the bridge, which had been built just wide enough to accommodate a single rider.

"No!" Augusta held up her hand to stop him, remembering the rotted board at the very last moment, but it was too late. The aged wood splintered under the animal's rear hoof and the poor beast scrabbled for purchase, unseating his rider. Augusta watched in horror as the man flew from the back of his mount and fell to the ground, striking his head on the wooden post anchoring the bridge. The horse managed to reach the bank, his flashing hooves barely missing his rider.

* * * * *

What the devil was wrong with the woman?

Colin Fordyce, newly invested fifth Earl of Bruxton, watched the young servant waver then stumble back into the wall of the old stone tower, her basket slipping from her fingers. It was as if she'd been utterly shocked to hear his name. Afraid she'd collapse completely and do herself harm, he spurred Jupiter into motion, setting him across a wooden bridge that had certainly seen better days.

"No," she cried, holding up a hand as if to halt his forward progress. Colin ignored the gesture. He was tired, dirty, thirsty and sick of sitting in the saddle. He'd ridden all the way to Scotland to deal with his spendthrift wards and to find out what the hell was going on with them. Be damned if he was going to let some slip of a servant deny him entrance.

All his cousin's — well, now his, he supposed — solicitor had given him was a list of five names and birthdates, along with the receipts for the generous quarterly allowance drafts that had been sent, via the earl, of course, to this remote castle in the borderlands, just north of Hadrian's Wall. Never one to sit on his hands and ignore a problem, Colin had saddled his horse, recruited his friend Darius Whitcomb, Marquess Langston and headed for Scotland. He'd left Dare at the village inn with a pint, preferring to meet his wards on his own. As he clattered across the bridge — and honestly, who still had a moat

these days, anyway? – he wondered if he should have brought the other man along for reinforcement. Nonetheless, Colin was determined to get to the bottom of this particular mystery. Today.

As he crossed the bridge, he could see her more clearly. She wore a shapeless gray pelisse and a brown straw bonnet that could not possibly have clashed worse if she'd tried, but under the abominable concoction was a very pretty face with a few freckles standing out in stark relief against her too-pale complexion.

Just as Jupiter's forelegs hit the packed earth of the path, Colin heard an ominous crack. Jupiter's rear hoof plunged through the board, loosening Colin's seat to a precarious perch. When the horse lunged sideways, kicking off with his other hind leg, Colin's knee was slammed hard into the bridge railing. One more lurch as Jupiter managed to pull his leg free, and Colin toppled off the stallion's back.

His shoulder hit the rail and he tucked his legs up to avoid Jupiter's iron-shod hooves. When he hit the ground, his head struck something and a flash of pain was the last thing he felt before the world faded to black.

* * * * *

"Oh sir, please wake up."

Colin opened his eyes to see the young maidservant bending over him. Well, to be more precise, there were two of her, at least at first. Her eyes – all four of them – were a warm, soft brown framed by thick dark lashes. A heart-shaped face, as it resolved into one single one, thank goodness, was bordered by wisps of straight chestnut hair.

Her small hands shook his shoulders with surprising strength. "Please, Lord Bruxton, don't die on me."

"Not...dead," Colin managed, after sorting out her words from the ringing in his ears.

"J-Jupiter?"

Her eyes narrowed? "My lord?"

"H-horse," he muttered. "Is...he...?"

"Oh." She glanced off to the side then nodded. "He's putting his weight equally on all four legs. I don't see any blood. I promise I'll check on him as soon as I get you inside – if you don't think he'll run off."

“Am I...bleeding?” Now that the world was starting to come into focus, he was acutely aware of a massive pounding inside his skull.

“No sir. Not that I can see.”

“Then help me over to that wall you were leaning on. I can wait there while you go get help.” His voice seemed to grow stronger as he used it, so he cleared his throat and continued. “Have a groom put Jupiter in a stall with some oats and water then check his leg. He’s had a long day as well.”

“There is a slight problem with that, my lord.” She bit down on her plush lower lip and Colin fought the ridiculous urge to soothe it with his fingers.

“What problem?” Christ, he already sounded like a lord, didn’t he? Almost as pompous as his old windbag of a second cousin. Gad, he’d have to stop that. Later.

“The problem is that I am the only one here. There is no one to help and there are no grooms.”

Chapter Two

What? One servant, alone in the entire castle? Granted, Cairnwyck wasn’t a huge motte-and-bailey castle like they had in England, but even this simple stone tower keep was awfully large for just one small woman to take care of.

His confusion must have shown on his face, because she smiled. “The children are visiting a neighbor and I’m afraid the only groom went with them.”

“Then we go to the stables,” Colin said. Something about her speech was confusing him further, but his head ached too much for him to sort it out. He thought he could walk, however. “Jupiter will follow me, and between us, I imagine you and I can get him settled.”

She eyed him doubtfully but held out her hands to help him to his feet. His head swam a bit as he stood, but he managed to stay vertical. Nonetheless, he didn’t complain when the pretty chit tucked herself under his shoulder and put an arm around his waist for

support. Leaning on her rather more heavily than he'd have liked, he whistled to Jupiter, who approached him with no trace of a limp. Good. Colin would heal from a sore head. Jupiter would not have from a broken leg.

Moving slowly, he let the young woman lead him around to the rear of the castle. The keep was set on a hill surrounded by the moat, which looked to have been made by digging a second channel and diverting half of a small stream. On the far side of the castle, the two branches reconnected, creating the island, with the tower on top of the small mounded hill and a few outbuildings behind it. Most looked to be in disrepair, but the stable had been maintained, or mostly so. The young woman led him inside, with the big black horse following behind.

"He's remarkably well trained," the girl said. "Will he let me put him in the stall?"

"In a moment. The light's better out here." Colin sank down onto a hay bale and whistled again, which brought Jupiter immediately to his side. The young woman stepped back, giving Colin room to check the stallion's rear legs for damage. Finding none, he breathed a sigh of relief. "He's fine."

"Thank heavens. I tried to tell you not to cross the bridge, you know." The maid approached Jupiter with a carrot held flat in the palm of her hand.

"You know how to make friends with horses," Colin said. "Why aren't there any in here?" The stable was eerily quiet.

"We only have the one and he's with the children," she said.

"One horse, one groom... Does the MacLeish family even live here? Or do they keep a house in Edinburgh or somewhere?"

"No, this is our home," she said with a sigh as she gingerly took hold of Jupiter's reins to lead him to a stall. Then her voice turned acidic. "And if you are indeed Lord Bruxton, then you should know we don't have the money for any such thing."

"What?" Colin started to stand to respond to her face-to-face, but his head was not cooperating. "I saw the bank drafts myself. My cousin has paid out a small fortune to this household every quarter."

"Cousin? So you're not Bruxton?" Her chestnut head with its ugly bonnet askew poked out of the stall.

"I am now," he corrected. Why was he having this conversation with a servant, anyway? She struggled under the weight of Jupiter's saddle as she carried it from the stall. With her eyes firmly averted from Colin, she set the saddle onto a sawhorse then marched back into the stall, spine ramrod straight. The girl would have made a fine sergeant, he thought absently.

"What is your name?" he finally asked as he heard her speaking softly to Jupiter while removing the bridle.

"Augusta," she answered coldly. "Miss Augusta MacLeish." Returning from the stall, she hung the bridle on a peg then filled a bucket with oats from a nearby barrel and disappeared again.

Augusta MacLeish? Well, that explained what had been bothering him about her speech. It was as educated as his own, even if it did have a soft hint of a Scottish burr. But it made no sense. This was the harridan who had sent letter after letter, haranguing the old earl for more money? And she dressed no better than a servant? What the hell was going on in this place?

"Oh hell." A bad feeling formed in the pit of Colin's stomach. He'd known, damn it, that his cousin Edward was a liar and a cheat. Why hadn't he considered that possibility here?

"Apt." Miss MacLeish picked up a wooden bucket and left the stable. Colin heard the sound of a hand pump then she returned and lugged the water into Jupiter's stall. Moments later she plopped down on a hay bale across from him. "I'll brush him in a moment." Retrieving a handkerchief from a pocket, she removed her bonnet and wiped her brow, which was shiny with perspiration. "It's a long walk to and from the village, you know."

What did that have to do with anything? Then Colin remembered the basket she'd dropped and the fact she'd crossed the bridge just as he'd rounded the bend in the road. "Oh hell," he said again then winced. "Sorry. The blow must have jangled my manners along with my brains."

Miss MacLeish scowled, unbuttoned her pelisse and slipped it off. The sprigged muslin dress beneath was, if possible, even shabbier. "If you'd paid attention, you wouldn't have been hurt. I heard the board start to go when I came across. I'd have let down the

drawbridge for you if you'd given me a moment."

He raised one eyebrow and hid a grin when she flushed.

"Well, I would have eventually." Her wide brown eyes narrowed as she studied him.

"Why have you come here?"

"To see for myself what was going on. According to my predecessor's solicitor, you have received a very generous quarterly allowance and yet there was a pile of letters from you, begging for or simply demanding further funds."

"The solicitor lied," she said flatly. "The allowance we were sent has been a joke. Without the money Margaret and I make selling eggs, we'd have starved."

"Margaret?"

"Our housekeeper, though since she hasn't been paid in two years, I suppose the term is inaccurate. Benefactor, perhaps. She and her husband Thomas are all who's left of the staff."

"And where is she?"

"Also gone with the children. She acts as governess when needed. Besides, her sister is Lady Carter's cook, so it gives them the opportunity to visit."

"And leaves you all alone? Why aren't you with them?"

She shrugged. "A number of reasons, not the least of which is a lack of suitable clothing for a house party. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll finish seeing to your horse, so we can then go inside while I make our supper."

Colin subsided, frowning at her back as she walked away. Every gentlemanly instinct he possessed urged him to get up and take care of Jupiter himself, but the moment he tried to stand unaided, his stomach churned and he was immediately afraid of falling back down.

What the devil was he going to do about this mess? Replacing the funds would be the easy part. While Colin's father had been the cadet branch of the Bruxton line, he'd also been the one who married money. Colin had a knack for investments and had added to that fortune considerably. The coffers of the earldom had never been fatter. But even with an appropriate income, leaving four children out here in the middle of nowhere with just one young woman to look after them bordered on criminal. Miss MacLeish—

Augusta – couldn't be much over twenty herself – twenty-two, if his memory served correctly – still well within marriageable age and the daughter of a viscount. She should be in London, shopping and preparing for the Season. Not stuck in a castle that could fall down around her ears at any moment. And damn it all, they were his responsibility. Augusta finished grooming the stallion, more than a little amazed that the powerful animal stood so docilely while she worked. The repetitive motions soothed a little of her anger and gave her a chance to catch her breath, away from the too-keen eyes of Lord Bruxton. Finally, the work was done and it was time to face him again.

"Let us get you inside, my lord." She hung the currycomb on its peg and dusted off her hands. "We may yet be able to dine before the sun sets." By her reckoning, sunset was perhaps an hour away, so it would be close. Could she really make an injured man ride to a strange village after dark? Ballocks! He couldn't stay here.

She helped him inside and settled him at the table in the kitchen before running back outside to fetch her basket and the few provisions she'd bought in town. Fortunately she'd purchased a big wedge of cheese and Margaret had left several loaves of fresh bread along with the chicken stew simmering on the stove.

Augusta quickly put the kettle on for tea. While she was sure her uninvited guest would have preferred something stronger, wine was a luxury they couldn't afford. Even if she suspected Thomas had a small supply of ale stashed away somewhere, it was no matter. Let Lord Bruxton see exactly what his predecessor and solicitor had reduced them to. He watched her in silence as she ladled the stew into bowls and set them on the table along with a loaf of brown bread, the wedge of cheese and a jar of Margaret's blackberry jam. Finally, she filled the teapot and set it down on the table to steep then took her place across from him.

"Forgive me for not standing," he said somewhat ruefully, breaking the awkward silence. "My mother would be appalled at my lack of manners."

Despite her mood, Augusta felt her lips twitch at his dry humor. She couldn't help teasing back. "Well, then we shan't tell her, shall we?"

"That would be most appreciated." He inclined his head formally, but his bright blue eyes danced. Up close she could see that he was really quite handsome, in a rugged sort of way. His hair was a burnished shade of gold and had fallen out of its queue to wave

softly to his shoulders. Long, dark lashes that would have looked effeminate on someone less robust framed eyes the shade of a summer sky. Wealthy, titled and handsome. Life really wasn't at all fair.

Even less fair was the way he made her stomach flutter when he smiled – and she didn't even want to think about the reaction his presence was causing in other parts of her anatomy.

"So, Miss MacLeish, tell me about your family."

She paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth and raised one eyebrow. "Shouldn't you already know about them? You are our guardian, after all."

He nodded. "I have a list of your names and ages. Nothing more. Tell me about them. To start with, why do all of you have names beginning with the letter A?"

She grimaced. "My father was Angus and his father was Adam. With each child, my father was so sure he would have a son that he only allowed for one name to be chosen – a male name beginning with the letter A. Hence, I was to be Augustus. There was an Andrew, but he died along with my mother during childbirth."

"I'm sorry."

"When Father married again, he insisted on continuing his lunacy. So Alexander became Alexandra, Anthony Antonia and Albert Alberta. Finally came Arthur. We're all glad he was a boy because I don't know how father could have twisted that into a girl's name."

"Yes, that might have been difficult," he agreed with a chuckle. "And your father has been gone for three years, according to the records I found?"

"Yes, he and Louise were killed in a carriage accident."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, but there was a genuine sympathy in his tone that was somehow warming. "But how did you come to be my cousin's wards in the first place?"

"He is – was – a distant connection of my stepmother and therefore of all the younger children. Louise was very proud of her highborn connections and my father succumbed to her wishes and named the earl as the children's guardian. I was supposed to be securely married off, you see and he didn't think to make separate arrangements."

"And what happened with that?"

Augusta shrugged. "Nothing terribly unusual. The young man inherited some money,

went to London and found someone who suited him better — and who didn't come with four children to be cared for."

"Shall I call him out for you?" He said it with a totally serious expression, but there was a twinkle in those bright blue eyes that was pure mischief.

Augusta couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing. "Oh thank you," she said, a moment later wiping her eyes with her napkin. "That's the first time I've laughed in two days."

"You're missing your brother and sisters?"

The wistful note in his voice made her tip her head and ask, "Do you have any siblings?"

"I did," he said. "A sister, but she died when we were very young. I can barely remember her."

"I'm sorry." She just restrained herself from reaching out and touching his hand. "I can hardly recall what it was like to be an only child. It seems I've spent all my life chasing after them. Without them, the castle seems so...empty."

"You never resented them? I know sometimes it's difficult to accept a stepmother and her children." He sounded as if he actually cared, which was stunning. Peers of the realm did not ask how a penniless young woman felt about her family. Perhaps his knock to the head had rattled his brains more than she'd thought.

But she answered anyway. It was nice to have another adult to sit and talk to over dinner. "Not a bit. My father was something of a recluse, so we didn't spend a lot of time visiting with other families in the neighborhood, although my stepmother helped repair that, at least a little bit. Without the children, I'd have been very lonely indeed." She poured the tea, ascertained that he took his black and handed him the cup.

"Did you ever wish to go to Town yourself, have a Season or two like other young women of your station?"

"Of course. I fantasized about ball gowns and handsome suitors as much as the next girl. Other times I was dreadfully glad not to. I'm really a very quiet sort of person. I'm afraid parties every night would soon become overwhelming."

"And your sisters? What would you like to see for them?" He finished off his stew and helped himself to a slice of bread with jam. At least he hadn't turned up his nose at such

simple fare.

“Choices,” she answered easily. “I want them to be able to live their lives in the ways that best suit them. I’d like them to meet eligible men and choose which, if any, they want to marry. I don’t want them forced into anything.” Images of Vicar Ellsworth rose in her mind.

He nodded. “Understandable. Your brother is twelve, correct? He should be going to school.”

“I know. He needs to mingle with other young men. I’m afraid that getting all of his education from older sisters may have given him a very odd outlook on the world.”

“I’ll arrange it as soon as I have you all settled.” He nodded, as if that were the final word on the subject.

“What do you mean ‘when you have us all settled’?” Augusta narrowed her eyes and glared. “Can you not simply restore a reasonable allowance and be done with it? Or did your cousin squander the principal as well as our earnings?”

“No, the viscount’s fortune is intact, as are your dowries,” he assured her. “And the Bruxton estate will repay the amount owing as well. I simply thought it might be best for all of you to come with me to Fordyce Hall for a while. If nothing else, I’m sure my mother will be delighted to help you and the girls shop for new clothing. You’ll have three years back allowance to spend, after all.”

Fordyce Hall, in Yorkshire, was the primary seat of the earls of Bruxton. Augusta knew that from her endless letters to the former earl. She chewed on a bite of bread while she thought. What he said did make sense. The girls would love a change of scenery, Arthur did need to go to school, and all of them could desperately use new clothes. And yet there were difficulties in the plan as well.

“How are we to travel?” she asked once she’d swallowed. “We can hardly go all the way to England in an old farm cart.”

“Blast it, I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” he grumbled. Then he looked up at her with a sheepish grin. “Sorry. Can I blame the headache for my lapse in manners?”

She grinned back. “Just this once, I suppose. It seems to have been a day for unusual language. I may have even used some myself when I received the solicitor’s letter.”

“The one stating no more funds would be sent until I’d reviewed the situation?” He grimaced slightly as he spoke.

She nodded. “At least you did choose to investigate. I’d assumed it was just another delaying tactic. More of the same.” She stood and began to clear the dishes from the table.

Bruxton’s lips formed into a thin line. “I assure you, Miss MacLeish. One way or another, everything is going to change around here.”

Chapter Three

It was fatiguing just watching her move, Colin decided, leaning back in his chair to finish his tea. He felt like an utter wretch for letting her wait on him, even if his head was still pounding. Now she was washing the bloody dishes. God damn his cousin for reducing her to this.

She wasn’t exactly a beauty. Her mouth was too wide, her nose and chin too strong and her dark, reddish-brown hair was too straight, though enough of it had fallen out of its knot that he could tell it was thick and shining, falling just to the point where her small waist dipped in between full breasts and lush hips. She didn’t wear stays and her dress was a touch on the snug side, so her unfashionably curvaceous figure was well delineated by the faded fabric. Unfashionable be damned, curves like that were enough to have a man drooling in his soup, especially after having her pressed up against him as she’d helped him into the house. Colin was glad he was seated so his body’s rather obvious response to his watching her would be hidden. This stirring of desire he felt was utterly inappropriate.

Finally, she finished the chore and glanced out the window above the sink. “It’s dark out. I don’t suppose you’ll be able to ride back to the village tonight.”

“I’ll be fine.” He’d ridden with worse injuries back in France. Slowly, bracing his hands on the heavy oaken table, he pushed his chair back and stood. The world didn’t swim, even if his temple still throbbed violently. “As long as Jupiter can carry me, I can ride.

Thank you for the meal and the chance to rest. I'll be back tomorrow to continue our discussion." He made it four steps toward the door when he staggered, not much, but just enough to force him to catch himself by grabbing hold of a cabinet.

Miss MacLeish — he'd already begun to think of her as Augusta — hurried to his side and slid her arm around his waist again. "You won't be riding anywhere tonight, I'm afraid. Let's get you to a bed, my lord."

He closed his eyes and sighed. Truth was, while he probably could make it back to the village inn, it would hurt like the very devil to do so. By tomorrow, he hoped to be back to normal, but for tonight, perhaps it would be all right for him to just rest.

"The MacArdles have quarters here on the first floor," she told him. "That might be easiest, if you don't object to being put in a servants' room."

"Not at all." Given what he'd seen, the servants probably lived as comfortably as the family. Besides, he'd spent two years in Calais, posing as the bookkeeper to a shipping operation, during his work for the Crown prior to Trafalgar. He was intimately familiar with living rough.

"This way, then." She picked up one of the lamps she'd lit during the meal and led him through the kitchen into a butler's pantry then down a narrow hall. A plain wooden door opened into a small suite, simply but comfortably furnished. She led him through the sitting room into a bedroom with a decently sized wrought iron bed and a fire ready to be started in the grate.

"This is perfect," he said, leaning against the doorframe. His arm around her shoulder felt natural and he let himself enjoy, just for a moment, the sensation of having an attractive woman snuggled close to his side. "I am sorry to impose, but I'm not sorry to have had the chance to meet in such quiet surrounds. I imagine our conversation would have gone very differently with four children in the room."

"Aye." He felt her relax against him and lean that glossy chestnut head against his chest. The soft scent of heather mingled with the musky aroma of a woman who'd spent the day working. "I'm still finding it hard to believe this is all real — that we can truly stop worrying about whether we can afford shoes when Arthur has outgrown his last pair or nails to fix the footbridge."

"I promise, 'tis real." He heard the gruff huskiness in his own voice, felt his shaft

harden. He touched her cheek with one finger. "On my honor, your family will never need to worry about such things again."

She lifted her face to his, her eyes bright and shining in the flickering light of the lamp. "Thank you."

Colin didn't stop to think. His body simply responded by instinct. Cupping her cheek in his hand, he slowly lowered his face to hers, their eyes never breaking contact. There was plenty of time for her to pull back, or even just turn her head and reject his kiss, but she didn't. Then his lips touched hers and time hung suspended.

She was soft, so very soft. His hand tightened on her waist as his lips moved against hers. When he lightly nipped her full lower lip, she let out an inarticulate cry, which gave him the opportunity to slip the tip of his tongue inside her mouth.

Oh lord, she tasted like heaven. How had he ever been attracted to willowy blondes who never did a day's work in their lives? This woman, curvy, sweet and strong, felt perfect in his arms. Her untutored but eager response to his kiss had him reaching for the fastening of her gown.

She didn't stop him as he untied the tapes at the back of her gown, making the snug bodice droop off her shoulders. The sleeves trapped her arms at her sides and he nudged her shift down as well, revealing two lush, white mounds. With one arm still wrapped about her waist to hold her still, he used the other to cup one of her heavy breasts. Her nipples were small but tautly furled, and he grazed it gently with his thumb, wondering how it would taste.

"Oh!" She pulled away from him, clutching the burning oil lamp that she'd clearly almost dropped.

Colin swallowed hard and sagged against the doorframe. Holy hell, they'd nearly burned the house down, literally as well as figuratively. With his own hands shaking more than he'd like to admit, he reached out and took the lamp from Augusta's hands while she made an effort to cover herself.

"I'd apologize, but it would be a lie," he said thickly, setting the lamp down on a nearby chest. "Still, I am sorry for getting carried away."

"I—ah—" She squeezed her eyes shut and backed out the doorway until her back bumped into the wall of the corridor behind her. "G-g-goodnight, my lord."

“Colin,” he told her as she turned and fled toward the kitchen, without so much as a candle to light her way. “After that, you had probably better know my name.”

* * * * *

Augusta rose at the break of dawn as usual and went out to feed the chickens and gather eggs. She’d had virtually no sleep the night before, having tossed and turned all night, replaying Colin’s kiss in her mind. Lord Bruxton. She had to remember to call him that, even in her thoughts. Just because they’d kissed didn’t mean a thing. It had been a simple thank-you for her taking care of him. Even what had happened next – his hands on her breasts – well, that had just been them both losing their heads. There was nothing personal in it, she reminded herself. Just the simple way of things between a man and a woman. The problem was, it hadn’t felt simple to Augusta. Not at all. She couldn’t help remembering how just the touch of his lips made her breasts swell and her lower belly ache with longing for something – something she’d never felt before, or even really thought about. Being around Lord Bruxton was more unsettling than anything in her previous experience.

She returned to the house to find him waiting for her in the kitchen. He’d even managed to fill the kettle and start it heating on the stove, along with slicing some bread and setting it on the rack to toast.

“Good morning,” she said, trying to mask her shock at his unexpected domestic capability. “I gather your head is feeling better this morning?”

“Considerably,” he replied with an easy smile that made her belly quiver.

Why couldn’t he be an ugly old troll? Pampered and useless like his cousin? It would make her life far less confusing.

“Are those fresh eggs I spy in that basket?”

Augusta looked down at the basket on her arm, which was indeed full of eggs, and nodded. How did he reduce her to speechlessness just by flipping toast in his shirtsleeves?

“Dare I hope that a few of them are for our breakfast?” Now the winsome smile was that of a hungry little boy – one Augusta found much easier to deal with. Arthur was always hungry. It seemed that didn’t change as a boy grew into a man.

"I just went to town yesterday, so all of today's eggs are for us to use," she said, setting the basket down on the table. "Do you prefer yours boiled or scrambled?"

"Scrambled please. And if there's any ham or bacon secreted away, I promise I'll replace it this afternoon. I find myself utterly famished this morning."

"I think I can find something." She couldn't help smiling back at him. It was such an enormous relief not to have to worry about rationing the food supply. "All that exercise yesterday has made me hungry too."

"I need to head into the village as soon as we've eaten," he continued as soon as she'd returned from the pantry with the last slab of bacon. "I need to see if I can hire a carriage, and if not, I need to send for mine from Fordyce Hall. Make up a list and I'll have whatever supplies you need sent out as well. Just do me a favor and let me use the drawbridge this time."

"I should put a rope across the end of the footbridge until it's repaired," she replied ruefully, "so no one else gets hurt." She began cracking eggs into a big work bowl while he sliced thick rashers of bacon and placed them into a heavy iron skillet.

"I'll do that while you finish cooking," he said. "I assume I can find a rope in the stable?"

"There should be some hanging on the wall. The windlass for lowering the drawbridge is in the left-hand gatehouse."

"I'll find it. Be back shortly." He leaned over, kissed her cheek and darted out through the kitchen door before she could respond.

Augusta turned the bacon with a long fork and shook her head. What in heaven's name was she supposed to do with that man?

* * * * *

What was he going to do with her?

Colin knew what he'd like to do with Augusta MacLeish, but then as the lady's guardian, he'd have to call himself out. Wouldn't that be awkward?

He checked on Jupiter, delighted to find him in top condition despite yesterday's accident. After he filled the water and oats buckets, he found a length of rope coiled and hung on a peg. It would do nicely for the purpose, so whistling a rather naughty sea

chantey, he made his way around the castle into the forecourt.

In front of the castle, a pair of small gatehouses flanked the drawbridge. In a proper medieval castle, the wall would have run all the way around the island, making the whole thing into a fortress, but here the gatehouses were just large enough to store a few tools and the walls of the gate tapered off to the ground on either side.

The winch inside the gatehouse was, to his immense surprise, in good working order. Of course, he shouldn't have been shocked. The castle and even the stables had been meticulously maintained. It was only money that Cairnwyck had been lacking, not attention. He'd lay odds that every one of the MacLeish family did their share to keep their home in functional, if not elegant, condition.

He lowered the drawbridge then walked around to the footbridge and tied the rope across the end, blocking it off. As he walked back toward the drawbridge, he heard the sound of hooves on the lane behind him.

"Oh look, the gate is open. Drive on, Coachman." A shrill feminine voice pierced the air. When the small gig drew up beside him, the voice bellowed, "Halt!" and the vehicle drew to a stop.

"You there. Who are you and what, may I ask, are you doing?"

Colin looked into the gig and saw a middle-aged woman in black, with her gray-streaked hair drawn up into a knot so tight it should have made her face hurt. A black veil atop a lavender bonnet indicated half mourning. Her thin lips were pursed in disapproval, probably at his underdressed state. It hadn't occurred to him to put on his cravat and frock coat before attending to this simple chore, so he stood there in trousers, boots and shirtsleeves, with his hair unclubbed. Blast it all.

The only way he knew to deal with snobs and busybodies was to beat them at their own game. He drew himself up to his full height and cast her his most supercilious sneer. With a sketched bow, he drawled, "Bruxton, madame, at your service. And whom do I have the pleasure of addressing this fine morning?"

"Mrs. Drummond!" Augusta must have heard their voices because she came running around the keep, wiping her hands on her apron. "What brings you out to Cairnwyck on this fine morning?"

Colin had to suppress a smile at her unknowing repetition of his words.

"I promised my brother I'd look in on you," the woman said with a pious sniff. "Clearly I should have come sooner. Who is this...ruffian?" The woman's coachman looked for all the world like he was trying to suppress a laugh and Colin felt a surge of sympathy for the man. It had to be difficult working for this old prune.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Drummond. Please, let me present you to the Earl of Bruxton, our guardian. Lord Bruxton, this is Mrs. Edwin Drummond, sister to our local vicar. Mrs. Drummond, would you like to come in for some tea?"

Colin winced at the conciliatory tone in Augusta's voice. He immediately held out a hand to the newcomer. "Delighted, Mrs. Drummond. Shall we?"

The older woman sniffed again, but she accepted his assistance to alight from her gig. Once she was on the ground, Colin immediately crooked his arm to escort her inside. He offered his other arm to Augusta, only to find she'd already run ahead to open the door.

"John, there's breakfast in the kitchen—just go in and help yourself," she called to the coachman. "You know where to tie the horses."

Oh good. They wouldn't be here long enough for the team to be unharnessed. That was the best news Colin had heard all morning. While Augusta held the front door open, Colin led the redoubtable Mrs. Drummond into the main hall of the castle.

It was clean. In keeping with the other rooms he had seen, this one had obviously been dusted and swept recently. Furnished to resemble a slightly more comfortable version of a medieval hall, it boasted four high-backed chairs sporting cushions of worn green velvet on a dais that filled one end of the room. Matching heavy draperies covered the leaded glass windows, topped by swags of a blue and green plaid, through which only a few moth holes emitted light. A massive stone hearth sat empty and had been swept clean.

"The parlor is much more pleasant than this room," Augusta said as she skirted around them. "Don't you think so, Mrs. Drummond? Why don't we take our tea there?"

"Anything is more pleasant than this moldering cavern," the woman replied. "I can't imagine what your mother was thinking to allow it to remain so...medieval."

"I'd hazard a guess that she was trying to retain the historical ambiance," Colin posited. "It suits the castle quite nicely."

“Thank you, my lord. That’s exactly right. My father gave both my mother and stepmother a free hand with the private chambers, but the great hall meant a lot to him. The MacLeishes have held Cairnwyck for many generations and this room has changed very little in all that time.”

Augusta had just crossed the room and started to lead the way down a corridor when there was a loud pounding at the heavy oaken double doors. “Now who can that be?” She ducked back around Colin and Mrs. Drummond. “No one ever visits, yet this morning I might as well be at Edinburgh Castle.”

Colin watched her generous curves sway as she darted back to open the front door. The look of confusion on her face was probably matched by an expression of horror on his own. For while Augusta could have no idea of the identity of the dandy who stood in her doorway, Colin knew him all too well. For someone who’d made a career out of being a successful spy, Dare had a knack for getting Colin into trouble in real life. Even as Colin opened his mouth to speak, to possibly avoid what was about to happen, Darius glanced over at Colin and grinned.

“Glad to see you’re alive, old chap. When you didn’t return to the tavern last night I was a bit concerned. Looks like you managed to come out on top however, as usual.”

“Didn’t...last night?” Mrs. Drummond gasped, fanning her face with the hand that wasn’t clutching Colin’s arm. “Dear heavens, my lord, just how long have you been at Cairnwyck? Overnight?”

“Lord Drummond had an accident...” Augusta began. “The footbridge...”

Colin shook his head. It was too late for palliatives. This old besom would have Augusta’s reputation shredded within moments of returning to the village and, judging by her expensive clothing, she probably had connections all the way from Edinburgh to London. Not only would Augusta be rendered unmarriageable, so would her younger sisters, all of whom were legally in Colin’s care. There was only one way out of this mess and he was man enough to accept it.

“It’s true, I was somewhat disoriented last evening after taking a blow to the head,” he said loudly, casting Augusta a look that ordered her to follow his lead. “And Miss MacLeish was kind enough to sit up and talk with me all night until I was myself again. By that time, I’d discovered myself to have fallen utterly in love. You may both be the

first to extend your felicitations. Miss MacLeish has just made me the happiest man on Earth by agreeing to be my bride.”

Chapter Four

Augusta gasped, but fortunately it was drowned out by Mrs. Drummond’s shriek. The dark-haired stranger ran across the room to clasp Colin — Lord Bruxton’s — hand and pump it vigorously. “Well done, old chap. Couldn’t be happier for you.” Then he turned to Augusta and took her hand, bowing over it with an elegance that was so overblown it made her smile. “Miss MacLeish, you are as gracious as you are beautiful. Bruxton clearly doesn’t deserve you, but as his friend, I thank you for your benevolence to this sorry creature and wish you all the happiness in the world.”

“Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you, Dare? Behave yourself and get your hand off my fiancée.” Colin stepped over to Augusta and drew her up close to his side. “Darling, allow me to introduce my closest friend, for some incomprehensible reason, Darius, the Marquis of Langston. Langston, this is Miss Augusta MacLeish, as you’ve surmised, and yes, she’s undoubtedly far too good for me. This good lady,” he nodded to Mrs. Drummond, “is a neighbor — Mrs. Drummond, I believe.”

Lord Langston turned his attentions to Mrs. Drummond, fawning over her almost as effusively as he had over Augusta. “Absolutely enchanted, I’m sure. Such a lovely bonnet, madam. Surely you do your shopping in London, if not Paris. Certainly not out here in the provinces.”

“Well, occasionally Edinburgh,” the older woman admitted with a coy smile at Langston’s practiced charms. “But you are correct, sir. This bonnet did come from an exclusive little milliner’s shop in Town.”

Augusta saw a look of understanding pass between the two men, as if they’d been trying to ascertain the length of Hortense Drummond’s social reach. Aye. Word would make it to Edinburgh and then London within weeks that Augusta MacLeish, sister of Viscount Cairnwyck, had spent the night with a handsome, unmarried man. Marrying

him was probably the only way to save her own good name and, by extension, those of her younger sisters. Damn and blast. It was all his fault, the wretch. She'd cursed, at least mentally, more in the last twenty-four hours than in all of her past twenty-two years.

"So, darling, shall we see about that tea?" Bruxton shook her just slightly, breaking her out of her daze. "I'm sure your guests are feeling thirsty."

"Of—of course." She bobbed a curtsy at Langston and flashed what she hoped passed for a smile at Mrs. Drummond. "As you can imagine, I'm quite overwrought with excitement. Please excuse me while I see to the tea. Mrs. Drummond, if you could show the gentlemen into the parlor?"

Trying to control the shaking in her limbs, she nodded at all three of them then spun on her heel and fled for the kitchen.

* * * * *

"It has to be before we leave Scotland," Colin argued under his breath. To satisfy Mrs. Drummond's need for propriety, Augusta had ridden into the village with the older woman in her gig while Colin and Dare rode ahead on horseback. "If we wait any longer, she'll have time to talk herself out of it. Besides, she can't travel with me until after we're wed."

"No need to wait for banns up here, either," Dare reminded him cheerfully. "Can have the deed done this afternoon." Colin had no idea why Dare was so bloody happy about the forthcoming nuptials, but it was annoying as hell.

Colin snorted. "Except the vicar is at the same damn house party as Augusta's brother and sisters."

"Awkward that. Though do you really need a cleric in Scotland? Thought a blacksmith could do the job." Dare's dark grin taunted him. Not many people knew the brilliant mind that lurked beneath the dandified façade, but Colin would never underestimate Dare's insight or intelligence. He couldn't think of a better friend to have nearby in such a sticky situation, even if it was Dare's mouth that had gotten him into this mess to begin with. Still, as he remembered last night, the sight of Augusta's bare breasts, the way she'd melted in his hands, he couldn't dredge up too much resentment over his

imminent leg shackling. At least bedding her would be fun. Even the thought of sleeping with no one but Augusta for the rest of his life didn't seem too great a hardship. Odd, when he'd never even contemplated that notion about any other female. "Go somewhere, old man? I was asking about a blacksmith."

Colin considered Dare's words then shook his head. "I don't want her to feel like the marriage isn't real. No, I suspect we shall have to send for the cleric. And the children. She'll want them to be present, I'm certain."

"Sounds like you've already come to know the lady fairly well," Dare noted with a wry smile playing around his lips and his brown eyes twinkling. "And you clearly respect her. This marriage may not turn out to be an unmitigated disaster after all, you know. I've never seen you think this hard about a woman in all the years we've been friends." Since they'd met at the age of ten and that friendship stretched back nearly twenty years, Colin let himself speak honestly. "There is something about her, Dare. Something unique. I can't say I'm not looking forward to the wedding night and I don't think I'm going to mind looking at her face over breakfast for the next fifty years, either."

"There are worse ways to start a marriage, old friend." With that, Dare clicked to his horse and moved into a canter, rendering further conversation impossible.

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"We shall send to Sir James and Lady Carter immediately, of course." Mrs. Drummond spoke to Augusta as if to a child, seeming to presume Augusta could not possibly expect to have any say in her own wedding. "My dear brother Ellsworth can ride into town, perform the ceremony and be back at the Carters' by suppertime."

"I want the children to come," Augusta insisted. "They're my only family. They should be at my wedding." It was the only issue on which she was adamant.

Lady Drummond's lips pursed but she finally nodded. "Perhaps Sir James and Lady Carter can bring them in their carriage. As the most prominent family in the area, they can serve as witnesses."

"That would be lovely, Mrs. Drummond," Augusta replied. "Thank you for thinking of it." Of course Hortense Drummond was happy about this wedding. It meant Augusta wouldn't be marrying the widow's brother Vicar Ellsworth. Being glad about that detail

was the single thing on which the two women were in complete accord.

Four hours later, Augusta walked up the aisle of the village church on Arthur's arm while her sisters practically skipped ahead of them. Lord Bruxton stood by the altar with his friend Langston beside him, looking calm and cool and far more pleased about this hasty marriage than he had any right to be.

She turned back to look at Colin. This was all his fault. She was glad her veil—a loan from Lady Carter—hid her face from the small congregation so she didn't have to worry about schooling her expression. It wasn't much of a turnout for a wedding. Only Mrs. Drummond, the Carters and the MacArdles filled the first few pews of the old stone kirk. Arthur handed her off to Colin then took his seat in the front, spine erect, acting every inch the viscount. For the first time since she'd entered the building, Augusta smiled. "That's it, darling, look like you're happy to be here," Colin whispered as he took her arm. "You're lovely in blue."

He'd insisted on taking her into the village dressmaker while they waited for the vicar and the others and purchasing her a new gown for the ceremony. The only ready-made frock available in her size had been a peacock blue walking dress of the softest wool, with a matching pelisse. The cost had been enough to feed the MacLeish children for a year, but Colin hadn't so much as blinked. Between the new clothes and the festive bouquet of hothouse flowers Lady Carter had brought along, Augusta almost felt like a countess already.

She was proud of the fact her voice hardly shook at all as she repeated her vows and secretly thrilled that Colin's didn't quaver a bit. Even Vicar Ellsworth's frown didn't bother her. He'd find some other spinster to badger into marrying him; she had no doubt of it. Besides, she was sure Colin had paid him quite a handsome sum for providing this favor.

As the ceremony drew to a close, Lexie took Augusta's bouquet and Colin took her hands in his. The ring he slipped on her finger was loose and she looked down to see it was his signet ring, the one she'd noticed on his hand the previous evening. She looked back up just in time to hear the vicar say, "You may kiss the bride." Colin's expression was tender as he lifted her veil.

This kiss was soft and gentle, nothing like the one the night before. It ended almost

before she could respond. Still, it was just enough to have her wanton body longing for more.

Then their small congregation applauded and soon they were back in the vicar's office, signing the register along with their witnesses. When it was done, she took a deep breath and looked down at the words in amazement. She was a married woman now — and a peeress at that. Tied for life to a man she'd only just met at this time yesterday.

"I still think it's horribly unfair that we didn't get new gowns as well," Lexie teased over dinner at the village tavern. The Carters had returned to their other guests, but Margaret and Thomas had offered to stay in town a bit longer to escort the children back after a meal. Having the children return to finish the house party would give Augusta and Colin a four-day "honeymoon" all alone at Cairnwyck Castle.

"There will be plenty of new gowns for everyone once we reach England," Colin assured the girl. "We'll leave as soon as my coaches arrive to take us — probably a week."

"I'll be riding out first thing tomorrow morning to fetch them," Langston agreed. "In the meanwhile, you'll have to make do with these." He pulled four boxes of sweets from behind his back and passed them out to the wide-eyed children. By the time they were loaded back into the Carters' spare carriage, they were stuffed and delighted with their new brother-in-law and his friend.

"I've spoken to Jennie MacRae from Whitestone Farm," Margaret whispered to Augusta before she left. "She's sent her daughters out to the castle to get a bedroom ready for you and your groom. I told her the green room on the second floor. And she'll pop in once a day to collect the eggs, leave a meal or two in the kitchen and clean up what's needed. She won't bother you anywhere else in the castle."

"Thank you, Margaret." Augusta gave the older woman a warm hug. What a thoughtful gesture, to ensure she wouldn't have to work on her honeymoon. "I'll see you soon." Margaret dabbed at a suspiciously damp eye. "Get on with ye now. Don't keep that fine man of yours waiting."

And waiting, he was. Colin stood next to the door of the Carters' second-best coach, ready to hand Margaret up with the children while Thomas rode on the box with the coachman. As the coach rode away, Colin put his arm around Augusta's waist and waved alongside her until the vehicle was out of sight.

“Are you ready to go home now?” he asked softly.

She nodded. “Though I suppose it isn’t truly my home any longer. Still, we should leave. It’s a long walk back to Cairnwyck.”

“But not so long of a ride. While you were being fitted for your gown, I managed to find you another wedding present.” Then he paused, a look of alarm momentarily crossing his handsome face. “You do ride, don’t you?”

Could he be any more thoughtful? “It’s been awhile, but I don’t suppose you forget.” She followed him to the stable behind the inn where his horse Jupiter was saddled and ready. Augusta smiled and petted the stallion’s velvety black nose. Next to him, also saddled, stood a dainty gray mare.

“Lady Bruxton, meet Lady Jane. I’m told she’s not overly fast, but that she has plenty of stamina.” Colin took hold of the mare’s bridle and motioned Augusta over. “The innkeeper took her in payment from an impoverished lordling, or so he says. I suspect gambling debts were involved, but didn’t inquire too closely. Will she do?”

Augusta looked into the horse’s gentle brown eyes and was enchanted. “She’s lovely. Thank you, my lord.” She leaned up and pressed a kiss on Colin’s cheek. “I’ve missed riding. And you even found a sidesaddle. How thoughtful.”

“Well, the groom knew of an older merchant, whose wife doesn’t ride anymore. I was astonished at how much help I had in arranging things. A large portion of the village contributed effort to putting together your wedding present, you know. You’re well loved here. Will you mind leaving so very much?”

Augusta shook her head. “Not as long as my family goes with me.” She let Colin help her mount and took hold of the reins. Once he was mounted as well, they rode side by side out of the stable. “Even then, it will only be for a while. Arthur shall be off to school soon and the girls will eventually go off and marry.”

“Perhaps,” he offered in a low, husky tone, “by that time we will have children of our own to keep you occupied.”

Chapter Five

Colin was having trouble believing it was his wedding night. Even worse, he was actually nervous. He'd never been married before, after all — never been with an innocent. What was he supposed to do?

Well, that was a stupid question. His body knew damn well what to do. It had been clamoring for exactly that since the moment he'd opened his eyes and seen Augusta — two of her — looking down at him.

Which didn't explain why he was pacing the kitchen floor in his stocking feet while she was upstairs getting ready for bed.

He'd sent her in ahead while he took care of the horses. Twilight was approaching fast and he'd hurried through the grooming process then brought his saddlebags into the house and unloaded his booty. Two bottles of champagne, some meat and cheese for a late-night repast, a bunch of grapes and even another box of sweets. He wanted tonight to be perfect for Augusta. Surely, after all she'd endured in the past few years, she was entitled to have a magical wedding night. The only problem was that the groom had a sudden case of the jitters. Shaking his head, he chastised himself. This would never do. He moved into the butler's pantry and found a tray, some rather dusty wineglasses and a couple of plates. After arranging the bounty on the tray and covering the food with a clean cloth, he mustered his courage and made his way up the stairs before it occurred to him he didn't know which room she was in. He'd never so much as set foot on the upper floors of the castle.

"My lord?" The voice floated down the corridor to the left of the stair landing, so Colin turned.

"Colin," he replied, finding one open door just a few feet down the hallway. "I don't care for the idea of being milorded on our wedding night."

Her laugh was soft and musical. "Oh good. I've never understood couples who call each other Mr. or Mrs. or whatever, even in the privacy of their homes. My father and stepmother always called each other by name."

He rounded the doorway and damn near dropped the tray. She stood in front of a looking glass in nothing but her chemise and stays. Her long, chestnut hair hung

straight and shining to her waist, the brush she'd been using still in her hand.

"Then so shall we," he decreed, setting the tray down with a clatter on a small writing table by the doorway. The room was a large one, with several chairs and a deep, cushioned window seat. A crackling fire burned in the carved stone fireplace. What dominated the space was a large, four-posted bed, turned down and inviting.

"These stays lace up the back," Augusta said, turning to face the mirror and pulling her hair over her shoulder to reveal the laces. "Since I don't have a lady's maid, you'll have to help me with them."

"Any time," he said fervently, stepping up behind her. The snug stays pushed her generous bosom upward then hugged the curve of her waist and hips. Unable to resist just enjoying her for a moment, he stepped up behind her and laid both hands on her waist, resting his chin on the top of her head as he regarded her reflection in the mirror. "You're lovely, you know. Every man in England is going to be jealous of my good fortune."

"You don't need to flatter me, Colin. We're already wed." In the reflection, her wide lips curled into a good-humored smile.

Her stays probably prevented her from feeling the ridge of his erection pressed into her lower back, but surely she knew he wanted her. "It isn't flattery if it's the truth, my dear. Look into the mirror and see how well we fit together."

Augusta couldn't mistake the gravelly tone of his words for anything but desire. Strange how she knew that, but she did. She studied their reflection, saw his darkly tanned hands standing out against the white linen of her undergarments. The day was quickly fading, but she'd remembered to light the lamps when she'd stoked the fire. Then she'd slowly undressed and hung her new dress in the wardrobe, deliberately stalling. While she knew, intellectually, what was supposed to happen tonight, she had no explanation at all for the odd sensations that tumbled around in her stomach and even less for the ones that made her breasts tighten and her thighs press together to salve the ache that had begun between them. She knew she was damp, as her body readied itself to take him inside her.

Fortunately, Colin seemed to understand. "Can you not see how perfectly designed you are for a man's hand, Augusta? Your waist is so small and delicate, your breasts so full

and appealing. Your hips are made to drive a man wild and that mouth..." He touched the corner of her lip with the tip of his finger. "That mouth has been making me want to taste it and more since the moment I met you. After kissing you last night, I couldn't sleep for wanting more."

"Really?" Her breathing was shallow as she waited to see what he would do next. "I couldn't sleep either," she admitted. "I wanted...more too."

Colin groaned. "Oh darling, you're making it very difficult for me to go slowly." While she still stared into the mirror, he lowered his head to kiss the side of her throat, bringing his hands up to rest just beneath the swell of her breasts. Her skin tingled where his lips touched, gently nibbling on her sensitive flesh, and she tilted her head to give him more access.

"You taste wonderful," he murmured, licking a line along the ridge of her shoulder, then moving around to nip at the nape of her neck. "But I want to see more of you, touch and taste more of you." He took a step back and slid his hands to the back of her waist to untie her stays.

Augusta willed her knees to continue holding her up as he carefully undid the laces then pushed the undergarment with its small cap sleeves off her shoulders. Now she wore nothing but the ridiculously thin chemise the modiste had insisted on, knowing that this would be Augusta's wedding night. The cotton lawn was so fine that she could see the dark circles of her nipples through the fabric and the dark hair at the juncture of her thighs. This time, when Colin laid his hands on her stomach and pulled her back against his body, she could clearly feel the thick ridge of his manhood against her spine and her knees wobbled even more.

"Look at the way your body responds to mine," he whispered against her ear. He cupped her breasts in his hands, lifting them so her hardened nipples could be clearly seen through the thin cotton. "Your breasts are swollen, aren't they? And your nipples have gone hard. You want this, don't you, Augusta? You want me?"

"Y-yes," she managed, gasping as his thumbs rasped her distended nipples. She'd never realized those rosy bits of flesh could be so sensitive. Her eyes squeezed closed as streaks of sensation shot from there to her womb. Then he pinched one taut bud lightly and her knees buckled entirely.

“You are so beautifully responsive,” he said as he caught her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

She laid her cheek against his chest where it rasped against the fine wool of his coat. “You still have all your clothes on.”

“Shall I rectify that?” After setting her down on the sheets, he stepped back from the bed and Augusta leaned up on her elbows to watch while he shrugged out of his navy blue coat and untied his snowy white neckcloth, setting both aside on a chair. He’d left his boots in the kitchen – or somewhere, she noticed. His feet were covered only by stockings he peeled off and tossed to the chair as well. She continued to watch as his gold-embroidered waistcoat followed and finally his snowy linen shirt, leaving him clad in only a pair of buff woolen trousers. He paused with his hands on the buttons at his waist and she took a moment to study his chest. Broad and muscular, it was covered with a light dusting of golden hair, mostly concentrated around his flat brown nipples. The vee of hair narrowed into a thin line that continued beneath the buff-colored wool. Her eyes remained fixed on his hands as, one by one, he undid the buttons on the fall of his trousers, untied the string of his smallclothes then slowly lowered both to the floor. *Oh my!* Augusta gasped in a breath as she took in the view of Colin, entirely naked and unmistakably aroused. His member jutted proudly from a nest of dark golden curls. It was longer than she’d expected and thicker as well, with ropy veins running the length of it and a plum-shaped and plum-colored crest. A tiny droplet of pearly liquid beaded at the slit in the tip and she licked her lips, wondering for a fleeting moment what it tasted like.

“And now you’re the one with too many clothes.” He stepped back to the bed, and when she knelt, he pulled her shift up over her head.

Instinctively, she started to cross her arms over her breasts then stopped. Wetting her lips again, she gazed up at Colin, who was smiling intently at her, his eyes hooded. His voice rasped as he asked, “Do you want me to put out the lights?”

“Not unless you think we should.” How was she supposed to know what the rules were about such things? She’d never been married and it wasn’t as if she’d had time for a long heart-to-heart with Margaret.

“There’s no such thing as ‘should’ in the bedchamber, dearest. Not as long as both of us

are content.” He sat down on the bed beside her. “I’d like to leave the lights burning, if that’s all right with you.”

She thought for a moment then nodded. She’d rather see what they were doing than fumble about in the dark, and Colin was certainly no hardship to look at. “All right.” Then he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, and Augusta forgot how to think. All she could do was feel. She laid her hands on his shoulders just to hold on, but found she loved the texture of his warm skin over such solid muscle. The soft pressure of his lips then the heat of his tongue when he swept it inside her mouth. He tasted of cinnamon, from the cake they’d had with supper and a little bit of the whisky he’d shared with the other men for a toast. He smelled of sandalwood and of warm, male flesh. That fragrance, combined with the heat beneath her hands, sent her senses reeling. She returned his kiss, slowly stroking her tongue along his, then following it back into his mouth, tracing the ridges and hollows as he had done to her.

She was too caught up to notice exactly when his hands left her face and began to travel over her shoulders then down her back. He pulled her body up against his, pressing her aching breasts into the hardness of his chest. His erection burned like a brand against her stomach. When she was forced to pull back from the kiss in order to drag in a ragged breath, he tangled one hand in her hair, tipped her head back and trailed his mouth down her throat.

“So lovely,” he murmured as he laid her back on the bed, leaning over her to continue his explorations. He feathered kisses across her collarbones then down to the valley between her breasts.

Augusta’s legs twitched restlessly and Colin shifted, laying one of his corded thighs across hers, holding her in place. Meanwhile, his mouth moved ever closer to her nipple, finally taking the aching peak into his mouth and suckling gently.

“Colin!” She cried out his name as she gave herself over to the feelings he evoked. She didn’t have names for the sensations, but her body knew what to do. When one of his hands slid down past her stomach, she instinctively opened her legs and arched up into his touch.

He switched his mouth to her other breast as his fingers began to caress and probe her damp folds. When he found the hard little nub hidden there and rubbed it gently, she

cried out again, although it wasn't a word this time — she couldn't have managed that. All she could do was clutch his back with one hand and hold his head to her breast with the other while tension coiled tightly in her belly. Her heart raced, her breathing grew frantic and her skin felt taut, as if she were about to burst. Then, inexplicably, she did. Light and colors flashed behind her closed eyelids as pleasure streaked through her body from her core to her fingers and toes. Colin continued his ministrations until her trembling slowed then he moved back up her body with his thighs wedged between her own. The tiny, bristly hairs on his legs rasped slightly against the delicate skin of her inner thighs, but she didn't care. He kissed her fiercely, hungrily, and she twined her fingers through his hair, responding in kind.

The thick tip of him nudged at her entrance as he used one hand to rub his cock in her moisture, wetting the plump head. He positioned himself carefully before pushing gently but firmly forward, but still she cried out at the sharp pang that accompanied his first thrust. He withdrew a little then pushed farther inside, stretching her tender flesh to the point of pain. Once he was seated, he stilled, kissing her deeply again until she forgot about the discomfort.

After a few moments, she realized it didn't hurt anymore and she was starting to want again, much like she had moments earlier. Only now she wanted more than his fingers and lips. She wanted Colin. All of him.

As if he were reading her mind, Colin began to move. Slowly at first then with increasing ardor. Augusta matched his enthusiasm joyfully. Soon she was lifting her hips to meet his and wrapping her ankles around the backs of his powerful thighs. Every stroke of his thick cock against her inner walls made her gasp with pleasure, every touch of his hand on her breast, kneading and pinching her nipple, urged her higher and higher.

She didn't quite reach the pinnacle she had before, but there was another small crest. She let out a cry, her inner muscles contracting and pulsing, just as Colin stiffened above her and she felt the hot wash of his seed flooding her core.

When the streams of hot fluid stopped pulsing inside her, he held himself over her, kissing her softly for long moments. Then, with exquisite care, he pulled away and stood. Dampening a cloth from the pitcher of water left on the washstand, he returned

to the bed and gently cleaned her inner thighs and her mound, even dipping the cloth just between her outer lips, removing her blood and his seed.

“Does it hurt very badly?” He leaned down to kiss the skin of her belly, right above her nest of curls.

Augusta shook her head. Then she scooted to the side to make room for him on the pillows beside her while he stepped back to the basin.

“Some couples prefer to sleep in separate beds,” he said after washing himself and coming back to stand beside the bed. He lifted one strand of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers. His handsome face was set and serious, though his skin was still flushed with exertion.

“Really? My father and stepmother never did.” Was he trying to back away now? Did he not want to sleep beside her? Augusta bit her lip to quell the surge of disappointment.

“I’d prefer to stay, if you don’t mind.” He reached out and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “We may have started this marriage out of necessity, but it is a real marriage and hopefully the only one either of us will ever have. I’d like us to begin our lives together by sharing a bed.”

“I agree. If nothing else, it will give us a chance to speak without children or servants listening over our shoulders,” Augusta said, relieved in some way she couldn’t identify. As soon as he’d put out the lamps, she gazed at him in the soft glow of the fire and patted the bed beside her. “Come to bed, husband.”

* * * * *

Colin woke feeling warm and content. The soft scent of heather mingled with the musk of sex in his nostrils at the same time as he felt the warm, soft body beside him. The heather scent came from her hair, a strand of which trailed across his face. It took a moment longer to remember that the woman in his bed was his wife. Instead of evoking terror, the thought made him smile as he opened his eyes. Augusta was lying on her side, facing away from him, her plump arse pressed up against his hip.

Their second coupling last night had been fairly sedate. They’d woken, shared some champagne and a bit of the repast he’d prepared then returned to bed, finding each other slowly in the dark. This morning, he was in the mood to play.

He was hard as a pikestaff already, as he smoothed his hand along one alabaster globe. Well, that wasn't entirely right. She'd left the curtains open last night and in the morning light that streamed through the window, he could see her skin wasn't perfectly white. She had half a dozen tiny freckles scattered here and there on her rump and he couldn't resist leaning over to kiss each and every one.

"What?" Her voice was muffled by the pillow she'd buried her face in while she slept. He could tell the moment she realized what was happening – her spine stiffened and she went completely still like a hare scented by the hounds. "Colin?" Her voice came out as barely a squeak.

"Hmm, it had better not be anyone else, my sweet." He chuckled, unable to resist teasing her. "This is our marriage bed, after all. I'd be quite unhappy to find another man in it with us." Then he licked a line from the base of her spine down to the crack of her delectable arse.

"Umm – ought you to be doing that? It doesn't seem quite...proper." Even as she spoke, he could smell her fresh arousal and see how she shifted her legs just a trifle to open herself more fully for him.

"I thought we agreed that there was to be no 'should' or 'ought' in the bedchamber," he reminded her as he skid a finger all the way down from her back to find the warm, wet haven of her quim. God in heaven, she was drenched for him again. He couldn't resist sliding that finger up into her tight, slick sheath. His cock throbbed, already eager to be inside her again. "No such thing as 'proper', either."

He chose to take her happy little moan as a sign of agreement.

"Are you sore?" Please, let her say no. He stroked his finger in and out, fucking her with it gently. When her hips began to move invitingly, he let out a small groan.

"Not really," she said on a gasp as he added another digit. "It feels so wonderful I wouldn't care if I was."

"Augusta!" Damn, could she be any more perfect? "Roll onto your belly then lift up on your knees, dearest." If he didn't get a taste of her soon, he was going to die. The list of things he wanted to do with her was endless and he couldn't wait to get started.

She shifted obediently, keeping her face down in the pillow while she lifted her pert backside up into the air for his enjoyment. Forced to remove his fingers while she

rearranged herself, Colin brought them to his mouth, tasting the rich, tart flavor of her cream. Once she was in position, he knelt behind her and lowered his mouth to her, swiping his tongue from her anus down to the swollen bud of her clitoris.

“Colin!” She shrieked and tensed at the first touch of his tongue then settled quickly as he began to lap at the seam of her labia, bringing one hand around her hip to rub gently against her pearl.

“Your taste is magnificent,” he told her. “I could eat your sweet cunt all day and be happy.”

He could tell by her sudden stiffness that she was shocked by the frank coarseness of his words, but she relaxed again as he continued to delve his tongue into her soft folds and caught her nub between two fingers.

“Just feel, Augusta. All you have to do is enjoy. If I do anything that doesn’t feel good, tell me, all right? It’s supposed to be about pleasure, for both of us.”

“All right,” she said on a long sigh as he stiffened his tongue and impaled her with it. “Everything so far feels wonderful.”

Christ, he was a lucky man to have landed such an adventurous bride. Colin pressed his fingers together on her clitoris and pumped her with his tongue, bringing her to a swift, shuddering climax. While her inner walls still pulsed, he reared up on his knees and replaced his tongue with his aching cock, sliding easily into her quivering channel. Her slick heat gripped him tightly as he began to move, the new position taking him even deeper than before.

“Yes, Colin, yes,” she whimpered as her quim clenched around him. Lifting one hand underneath her, he caught one of her swinging breasts, rasping against her engorged nipple with his palm.

This time as her orgasm hit, she didn’t whimper, she screamed, loud and long. Her cunt gripped his shaft like a vise, holding him deep, with the head of his cock lodged at the entrance to her womb, as the force of his own release boiled up in his tight, overfilled ballocks. He held back, reveling in the sensation, then he pulled back and thrust deep one last time as his body erupted into Augusta’s, filling her with pulse after pulse of seed. He shouted something, he thought – it may have been her name, but he couldn’t even hear his own voice. His vision tunneled and his mind went blank – all he could do

was feel.

“Can’t breathe,” Augusta mumbled from beneath him sometime later. “C’n you move, pl’s?”

Colin came to his senses, realizing he’d collapsed on Augusta’s back, pinning her facedown into the mattress. Gathering all his strength, he rolled to the side, pulling her with him to lie sprawled atop his chest. “Sorry,” he managed to mutter.

The sound she made was somewhere between a chuckle and a snort. “I’m not.”

He dragged the coverlet up with the hand that wasn’t around her and they fell asleep again, sated in each other’s arms.

Chapter Six

The next few days were, indeed, an idyll out of time. Although Augusta spent some time packing for the trip to England with Colin’s help, they also spent a great deal of time in bed. Or on the floor. Once even bent over Augusta’s sitting room sofa. She’d never imagined lovemaking could be so exciting, or that so many variations existed. It seemed all they had to do was glance at one another and suddenly they were in each other’s arms. Of course, she knew that this was only a honeymoon and that everything would change once the children came home, but still, it would give them a good foundation on which to build the rest of their lives.

On the fourth day, the farm cart bearing the children returned. Colin stood beside Augusta at the foot of the drawbridge as Thomas drove across and stopped. All four children tumbled out of the cart, each eager to be the first to hug their sister. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes – she’d missed them so, but a guilty part of her acknowledged she was going to miss the solitude she’d shared with Colin for the past few days.

Lexie and Bertie chattered on nonstop about their adventures at the house party, with even the quieter Toni contributing a few words here and there, while Arthur and Colin immediately moved to help Thomas with the luggage. Arthur glowered at Colin a bit,

but when Augusta moved to speak to him, Margaret intervened.

“They’ll need to work things out on their own, my lady,” the older woman advised.

“Never fear, they’ll be all right. But young Arthur’s been the man of the house for three years now. It will take him some time to accept a new brother.”

“Of course.” Augusta remembered how she’d felt, even as a small child, when her father had brought home a new wife. How much harder must it be for Arthur, on the edge of manhood himself? She left the men to the luggage and, with Margaret’s help, shepherded the girls into the kitchen.

“Are we really going to London?” Lexie asked as they all set about putting things out for tea.

“To Colin’s home in Yorkshire first,” Augusta replied. “After a few weeks there, I think he plans for us to continue on to London.” It would be June by then and the Season would be nearly over, but there would be just time to shop, to take in a few key events to introduce Augusta to the Ton and to get Arthur outfitted for the fall term. Colin seemed to think there would be no problem whatsoever in getting him into school. The combination of titles and money always seemed to open doors.

“Will we ever come back to Cairnwyck?” Antonia’s words were soft but so forlorn Augusta went over and wrapped her arm around her middle sister’s waist.

“Of course we will. Cairnwyck will always be our home and it will be Arthur’s primary residence one day. I’m sure Colin will want to spend some time here each year, making sure everything is up to snuff, and Arthur will need to learn how to manage the farms and such.” And wouldn’t that be a load off of Augusta’s shoulders – not that there was much left to manage. All the rents had gone straight to Lord Bruxton – the old Lord Bruxton, with no money coming back for upkeep.

“Do you think there’s a library at Fordyce Hall?” Books were the delight of Antonia’s life.

“An enormous one,” Colin said as he came into the kitchen carrying the last basket from the cart. “And you could do me a great favor by determining what’s in there. The last earl could barely write his name, let alone read, so I’m sure all those books are in dire need of some tender loving care.”

Colin beamed and Augusta smiled at Colin over her sister's shoulder. What an amazing, thoughtful man. She was truly the luckiest woman on earth.

* * * * *

At the top of the last rise in the road, before reaching Fordyce Hall, Colin pulled Jupiter to a halt. Augusta was riding Lady Jane beside him while the children rode in the coach, which was a few hundred yards behind them. The MacArdles had been left as caretakers of Cairnwyck, with a bank draft for three-years' past wages and an estate account from which to pay for servants and repairs. Arthur's heritage would be waiting for him in fine form when he was ready.

Colin watched Augusta's face carefully as she took in her first view of his ancestral home. The seat of the earldom was a large, sprawling manor of yellowed limestone — partly Tudor, partly Georgian in construction, with a central hall that was rumored to be part of the original medieval construction on the site. Even though he'd been here as a child only for obligatory visits, he'd fallen in love with the place at once, never dreaming that through a machination of fate, it would one day be his. His cousin hadn't been the best of landlords — about as reliable as he'd been as guardian — so Colin knew he had a lot of work ahead of him to restore both the property and the confidence of the tenants. Augusta would be an admirable partner in those efforts, he thought, based on the way the people of her village adored her.

When they first topped the hill, he heard her gasp, saw the look of wonder flood her dark eyes. She turned to him and swallowed hard. "This? This is Fordyce Hall?"

He nodded. Did she see the beauty in it or only the decay? "A rambling old pile, but it's ours."

"Oh Colin, it's magnificent." She turned her face back toward the house, sniffing suspiciously.

"My cousin preferred to spend his time in London, so the townhouse there is in much better shape. I also own a smaller estate on the Lincolnshire coast — one that came to me through my maternal grandparents. My mother makes that her primary residence when she's not in London." So had he until very recently.

"She's here now, however?" Augusta asked, chewing on her lower lip in the way he'd learned meant she was worried.

“She is. She’d come with me to help sort things out after I inherited and was staying on to keep things moving while I traveled to Scotland to meet my wards.”

“She won’t mind having our horde descend upon her — or having a daughter-in-law to deal with?”

“According to the letter that arrived with the coaches, she’s utterly delighted. She’s looking forward to having children to spoil again.” Colin nudged Jupiter right up against Lady Jane’s flank so he could reach out and touch Augusta’s shoulder. “Also, since she’s never been the Countess of Bruxton, she has no attachment to Fordyce and will be able turn over the reins of the household without a qualm.”

Augusta rolled her eyes and grimaced. “We’ll see. I’ll try hard to keep quiet, but I’ve been on my own for quite some time. I’m afraid I’m inclined to be a bit...bossy.”

Yes, she was, but never out of selfishness or laziness — she’d simply taken control to ensure that her family survived, and Colin couldn’t fault her for that. Instead, he grinned. “Yes, well, countesses are allowed to be on the imperious side. Now let’s go, darling. Our dinner might still be waiting.”

They spurred their horses forward. Colin was unsurprised to hear a shout ring out as soon as they approached the front drive, but he was a little amused to see his mother come running out the front door just moments later. Her blue-gray eyes — a softer color than his own vivid blue — sparked brightly as she waved and smiled.

They rode up to the steps, stopping as a groom hurried out to take their horses. Colin dismounted and hurried over to Augusta’s side to help her down. His arm firmly about her waist, he led her up the steps and stood in front of his mother.

“Mother, I’d like you to meet the new Countess of Bruxton — my bride Augusta.”

Augusta swallowed hard as she looked up into the smiling face of her mother-in-law. Helena Fordyce was a true beauty, still tall and slender in her fifties. Her hair was as golden as Colin’s, and if there was a streak or two of silver mixed in, she hid it well. Dressed in what Augusta assumed was the height of fashion, she could easily have been intimidating, but the welcome mixed with curiosity in her expression immediately put the younger woman at ease.

“Welcome, my dear.” Helena reached out and took both of Augusta’s hands in hers before leaning down a bit to kiss her cheek. “Dare told me a little about you — I’ve been

so looking forward to meeting you face-to-face.”

They all turned to watch as the coach rumbled to a halt. Arthur jumped out the moment the door was opened then Colin stepped over to hand the girls down, one by one. Augusta tensed as she watched her mother-in-law’s reaction, but Helena’s smile only grew even wider.

“Oh how delightful. I always wanted a whole houseful of children, but was only blessed with two. You’re sure you don’t mind sharing them with me, my dear?” She squeezed hard on Augusta’s hand.

Augusta felt some of the strain of the past three years roll off her in waves. She loved her siblings, but being the only one looking out for them had been exhausting. A wry chuckle escaped her throat. “Believe me, they’re enough to keep both of us more than occupied.”

As Colin herded the children up, one by one, to meet his mother, she greeted each of them warmly and had clearly already memorized names and ages. As soon as everyone had been introduced, Colin gestured toward the door. “I assume the servants are all lined up and waiting to meet their new mistress?”

“Of course,” Helena replied. “I hope you don’t mind, but I did pension off the former earl’s valet and a few others who were either positively doddering or simply not inclined to accept a change in the order of things.”

Augusta raised one eyebrow at Colin and he shrugged.

“A few of the staff were...cronies of your previous guardian. In other words, complicit with his less-than-ethical behavior. I’d already replaced the steward and I sent a letter with Dare, informing the solicitor that his services were no longer needed. We’ll have some work to do here, helping the old place recover from their poor management. Do you mind?”

She shook her head. “Not a bit. As long as I can get a bath, a meal and a bed – preferably in that order – I’m game for anything.”

* * * * *

Much later, she remembered those words as she waited for Colin in the dark, gloomy master bedroom. The former earl had been a widower for many years, so the connecting

countess suite had been converted to a study. She didn't mind at all the idea of sharing with Colin, but a woman's chamber might have been a bit less foreboding. The massive, ebony four-posted bed with black and maroon brocade curtains felt more like the den of some creature than a restful place of slumber.

She'd had her bath right after being introduced to a veritable army of servants. Several maids had whisked off the children to their own quarters and Colin had disappeared with his valet while Betsy, a friendly maid with a cheery Saxon face, had helped Augusta out of her traveling clothes and into a large iron tub, full of blissfully hot water laced with rosewater and almond oil. She'd been scrubbed head to toe with matching rose-scented soap then dried off with thick towels that had been warmed by the fire. Meanwhile, another servant had apparently unpacked her clothing and pressed her best evening dress, a simple green silk that was at least four years out of date. Still, with her damp hair braided and coiled in a coronet, she'd felt at least clean and respectable as she'd gone down to dinner on Colin's arm.

Even the children were subdued, tired from several-days' travel and none of them had complained when Augusta decreed it was time for bed. She followed them upstairs, settling Bertie and Arthur in the nursery suite, with Toni and Lexie in adjoining rooms nearby. As each had been promised by Colin that they could redo their rooms however they liked, the fact the quarters were a bit shabby didn't bother them a bit. Augusta had kissed them each then returned to the earl's chamber where Betsy again helped her undress. Now she waited restlessly for Colin. While they traveled, they'd shared their room with Arthur, so it had been several days since they'd made love. Tired as she was, her entire body tingled, longing to feel his touch upon her skin again.

The door from his dressing room finally opened and Augusta looked up from where she sat on a footstool in front of the fire. He leaned against the door in a silk banyan and smiled wickedly.

"Promise me, wife, that you're going to do something to cheer this mausoleum up a bit. The house itself is wonderful, but the décor..." He broke off with an exaggerated shudder.

"It's all expensive, excellent quality," she agreed. "But a wee bit...dark?" She couldn't help but be delighted by the idea that he wanted her to take charge of his home.

Colin laughed. "Well, the view in this room has already improved considerably – just because you're in it." He crossed swiftly to her side and held out a hand to help her to her feet.

"And here I was thinking it had gotten better just in the last minute or two," she teased back. It still amazed her that although he'd only married her because of his overdeveloped sense of duty, he never failed to treat her as if this was a normal marriage. Even his mother had welcomed them all with open arms. There was a part of Augusta that couldn't help but wonder when the bubble was going to burst.

"I know you're tired," he began as he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her forward. "But I was hoping you're not too tired."

Less than a fortnight ago, she'd have blushed, but now the blatant desire blazing in his eyes excited her without causing the least bit of embarrassment. "Suddenly I'm not tired at all." She reached down to untie the knot on his banyan.

"Mm, me either," he murmured, nuzzling the side of her throat. "This bed may be ugly, but the mattress is good and it's nice and big."

"Lovely," she replied as she pushed the silk robe off his shoulders. "I've missed you."

"Likewise." He lifted her old flannel nightdress up over her head and tossed it aside. He hitched himself up onto the edge of the bed, pulling her between his spread legs. She leaned forward to meet his kiss, her body pressed against him, feeling every inch of his skin along hers. The bed was high, so his erection pressed into the skin of her upper belly, the plump tip reaching just below her breasts. She flattened her hands against the crisp sprinkling of hair on his chest and rubbed his flat, tan nipples with her fingertips. His lips ravaged hers. It had been far too long since they'd been alone together. She opened eagerly, welcoming his tongue inside her mouth and stroking it with her own. Wanting more, she pushed back, slipping inside the heat of him, tasting and feeling every surface and hollow. Her audacity was rewarded with a low moan that rumbled up from his chest, vibrating them both.

His approval gave her the courage to grow even bolder. She pinched his nipples then dragged her hands down to grasp his slim hips. Pulling her lips away from his, she ran a row of kisses down his chin to the strong column of his throat. She nipped lightly, burying her nose in the crook of his neck, inhaling deeply of his rich, masculine scent.

His shaving soap had a slightly spicy aroma, as did his skin all over from his recent bath, but underlying it was an even more potent layer – the salty tang of aroused male and something indefinable yet uniquely Colin. She could recognize him blindfolded in a crowded ballroom just by his scent, and it never failed to fuel her arousal. Squeezing her thighs together to assuage the ache at her core, she trailed her lips lower to kiss then lick one firm, flat nipple. Despite her longing to have him inside her right now, he'd already taught her the value of making the pleasure last. She flicked the taut nub with her tongue before lightly nipping it with her teeth.

He murmured her name and threaded his hands through her hair as the muscles of his abdomen clenched against her skin. Encouraged by his response, she sucked at his nipple, mimicking the act he'd so often done to her. His fingers flexed in her hair as his breath hitched in his chest.

Augusta swayed her body, feeling the hard length of his cock trapped between his belly and her breasts. It seemed only fair to spend time on his other nipple, so she did, making sure to wiggle her torso, teasing his erection.

"You're a fast learner, love," he whispered into her hair.

"Mm," she murmured as she reached out one foot to hook the stepstool that sat beside the bedstead. Pulling it beneath the bend of Colin's knee, she positioned it between his feet then let her kisses trail down along his taut stomach as she dropped to her knees on the top step.

"Augusta..." he began as she took his thick, heavy member into her hand.

She'd explored him enough to know the feel and shape of it, but she'd never studied it this closely, with her hands, eyes and...mouth. Suddenly ravenous for the taste of him, she wrapped both her hands around his length and softly licked the tip where a tiny droplet of fluid beaded.

The flavor was bitter and salty but strangely appealing. Curious, she ran her tongue around the underside of the flared head of his cock, learning the subtle details of shape and texture along with taste.

"You don't have to do this, darling," he said softly. "Many women don't find it pleasurable."

Augusta looked up, perplexed. "But you've used your mouth on me and I enjoyed it

very much. Why would I not wish to return the favor?" Even as she spoke, she instinctively moved her hand up and down on his shaft, reveling in the feel of the soft skin over sturdy hardness. Her lips quirked into a grin. "I thought there was no such thing as proper in the bedchamber?"

His guttural laugh ended in a groan as she tightened her hand. "By all means, if you're having fun, continue. God knows, I'm enjoying it."

Reassured, she resumed her explorations, tracing her tongue down the thick ridge that ran the length of his shaft. His cock twitched beneath her as she touched him with her lips, tongue and fingertips, inciting her curiosity even further. When she reached the base, she cupped his heavy ballocks in one hand, learning the textures of the crinkly skin and coarse, prickly hairs. The sac was taut, his testicles drawn up close to his body, swollen with seed. She dropped a soft kiss on each one then kissed her way back up his shaft to the plump head, already leaking even more fluid, which she lapped up greedily. After one more swirl of her tongue around the perimeter of the tip, she opened her lips and took as much as she could inside her mouth.

"Yesss," he hissed. "So warm and wet. Suck it, sweetheart – yes, just like that."

She couldn't speak, but she followed his urging and suckled the head of his cock, drawing him deep into her throat. She couldn't fit all of him inside, so she wrapped one hand around his shaft and cupped his sac in the other.

"God, that's good," he said on a long sigh. He reached one hand down to cover hers, teaching her the rhythm that pleased him best.

Augusta didn't think she'd ever been so aroused. She was nearly drunk with the sense of power that came from reducing a man as strong as Colin to whimpers and moans. His hips bucked, driving him deeper into her throat with each thrust and she instinctively speeded up her pace. He fucked her mouth even harder, his breathing short and shallow.

Suddenly, he gripped her shoulders and tried to push her away.

Augusta paused, glancing up at him without pulling her mouth away from his cock.

"I'm about to climax," he warned in a husky rasp. "If you don't want me to spill in your mouth, you need to stop now."

Carefully, she pulled her lips away and asked, "Would you mind?"

His groan was long and rumbled through his entire form. “Not in the least. Whatever pleases you, my love.”

She wanted him inside her, but she knew from experience that he’d recover quickly enough for a second orgasm tonight. And this – this was something new and exciting, something she could do for him, for a change, rather than the other way around. Closing her eyes to savor the moment, she sucked his member back into her mouth.

It only took moments until he was back to where he’d been, breathing raggedly and thrusting between her lips. She sucked deeply, stroking him with one hand as he’d taught her, gently rubbing his testicles with the other. Following the cues from his body, she timed her motion and suction to his thrusts, increasing both as he moved faster and harder, as his hand tightened in her hair almost to the point of pain. Rather than flinch, she enjoyed the tug as proof that she had the ability to make him lose control. Soon, he thrust hard then held himself deep at the back of her throat and spent, sending hot rivulets of liquid cascading down her throat, filling her mouth. She swallowed convulsively, drinking down his essence for long moments until he finally stopped. Then she eased him out of her mouth and gently licked him clean.

As soon as she finished her ministrations, Colin tucked his hands beneath her arms and lifted her to her feet on the step, putting her face level with his own. He kissed her fiercely, tasting his own semen on her mouth and was amazed all over again at what she’d been willing to do to please him. Augusta was every man’s dream – a lady in the dining room, a sergeant behind the scenes of the household and a wanton in the bedchamber. Even though he hadn’t gone to Scotland in search of a bride, he couldn’t have found a better match had he spent years seeking one out. She was everything he could have asked for and more.

Pulling her with him, he rolled back onto the bed some helpful servant had thoughtfully turned down. The sheets were cool against his back while Augusta was delightfully warm against his chest. Her mound was pressed against his groin and he felt the first stirrings of a renewed erection. With Augusta, he was like a lad again, ready to go almost as soon as he’d finished the first time.

However, he felt it was his turn to spend some time pleasuring her, so he tugged her up

the bed until she was resting on the pillows. He kissed her once, hard, then scooted down to pay serious homage to her lush breasts. Reaching across her waist, he cupped one pale mound in his hand while he lowered his mouth to the closer one. Her nipples were dark and beaded – it hadn't taken him long to discover they were exquisitely sensitive. First he circled the rosy nub with his tongue, mimicking the action with his fingertip on its mate. When she moaned and arched her back, he increased the stimulation, lashing her nipple with his tongue while he flicked the other with his thumb. Her skin smelled of roses and sweet, salty woman as her legs twisted restlessly against the sheets. Determined to drive her as mad as she'd driven him, he took his time, laving her nipple then suckling deeply until she was whimpering with every breath. Even then, he simply rolled over her, switching his attentions to the other side.

"I need you," she finally said brokenly. "Your hand, your mouth, something...down there."

"You need something in your quim?" She still shied away from the frank words, but he could tell she liked to hear him say them.

"Yes," she sighed. "Please."

"Not yet." He sucked once on her turgid nipple then looked up at her and grinned. "I'm enjoying myself here. But you've two hands of your own. Touch yourself if you like."

"Touch...myself?" There it was, that engaging note of curiosity in her tone. "That wouldn't bother you?"

"Not a bit. You're welcome to pleasure yourself any time you'd like," he told her.

"Whether I'm with you or not." As long as it was never for anyone else. One thing he was damn sure of was that Augusta was his – for the rest of their lives.

His mouth still working her breast, he watched closely as she splayed her legs and lowered one hand to rest on her mons. Slowly, she began to move her fingers, exploring her own folds before she settled in to rub – probably on the bud of her clitoris. He suckled harder as he watched her hand move faster, saw her legs sag farther apart, heard her breathing fracture into soft gasps. He released her breast with his mouth then moved to kneel between her legs, watching as she worked her own pearl between two fingers.

God, she was beautiful, lost in her passion and self-discovery. She was so close and he

wanted to be part of the experience. Reaching up with one hand, he pinched her nipple while he inserted two fingers from the other hand into her wet, hot channel.

“Colin!” She convulsed around his hand on just the second stroke, gripping his digits tightly with her strong inner muscles while her legs clamped down on his hips.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured, continuing to move his hand slowly in and out of her claspng cunt while she eased down from her peak. Once she’d finished, he leaned down and licked her, as she had him, lapping up her thick, rich cream. Then he moved up beside her and kissed her again, letting her taste her own essence on his lips and tongue before rolling over on his back and pulling her atop him. He was fully hard again and longing to feel her slick, tight walls gloving his rigid cock.

“Ooh, I like this,” she sighed. They’d only tried this position once or twice before, but he knew she enjoyed the freedom of controlling pace and penetration. Colin didn’t much care what she did, as long as she moved.

First, she leaned down to kiss him again, her long, silky hair falling around them both like a curtain. Her lips were mobile and fluid on his as she slowly impaled herself on his erection, closing him in her moist heat.

“That’s it, love. Ride me.” He lifted his hips to meet her rocking motions and caught one nipple with his mouth as she rose up to deepen their connection. He sucked hard as she rode him swiftly, her lip caught between her teeth and her eyes squeezed shut. Faster and faster she moved as Colin’s release approached, his testicles drawn tight and full. He cried out her name as he erupted again, this time flooding her core with his seed. The wet splash must have pushed her over too. Her body shook as her quim spasmed. She bowed her spine and held herself rigid for long moments as her body quaked then, with a soft cry, she collapsed on his chest, limp and damp with sweat.

“You amaze me,” he murmured as he slipped away to douse the lamps. Climbing back into bed, he drew her close and pulled the covers up over them both. “Good night, my sweet.”

A soft snore was his only response.

With a quiet, contented chuckle, Colin followed her into slumber.

Chapter Seven

London, a few weeks later

Augusta was exhausted.

As soon as Betsy, her new lady's maid, finished unlacing her stays, she dismissed the girl and flopped down on her bed, still in her shift and stockings. She had an hour before she needed to dress for this evening's entertainment and she intended to spend it napping. London was magnificent, but even managing Cairnwyck Castle alone had never seemed so daunting. When was a woman supposed to sleep? After a two-week stay at Fordyce Hall – with which she'd already fallen utterly in love – they'd moved on to the Capitol and Augusta wasn't sure she'd had more than ten minutes off her feet since they'd arrived ten days earlier.

They'd been invited to parties every night since they'd reached London, even before Augusta's official presentation at court, with Colin's mother as her sponsor, the day before. Lady Helena was a lovely woman and her knowledge of the Ton was invaluable, but she was something of a slave driver. So far, she hadn't allowed Augusta even one night free from balls or a single day's rest from shopping or strolling in the Park or making afternoon calls.

Eventually, Augusta was going to have to tell her mother-in-law that she was pregnant. She'd been married more than six weeks now and her courses were three weeks past due. Augusta had never been late before, so she was fairly sure she'd conceived. Adding in her constant fatigue made it a near-certainty. She remembered her stepmother's last pregnancy, and for the first few months, all Louisa had done, it seemed, was sleep. Augusta had wanted to be absolutely sure before she told Colin, and she wanted to tell him before anyone else. Since she'd barely seen him in the last three days, however, she hadn't had the opportunity. Maybe tonight. He was attending Lady Merriweather's ball with Augusta and his mother. Surely she could manage to talk to him when they got home, before she dropped off again. Last night, she'd fallen asleep before he'd even come home, and Colin had slept in the adjoining bedroom. It had been the first time they'd slept apart since the day they were married, and Augusta wasn't pleased about it

at all.

* * * * *

Colin sipped champagne and looked out at the dance floor where his wife was dancing with some young pup barely out of leading strings. She'd been a smashing success so far, despite her rural upbringing and impoverished recent years. Regardless of circumstances, she'd certainly been trained to be a lady, and as her husband, he couldn't have been prouder.

Still, it would have been nice to have a chance to actually talk to her on occasion. Since they'd reached London, they'd barely had the opportunity to nod at one another in passing. The social whirl was wearing her down too. There were shadows under her eyes, just like there had been when he'd met her. Last night, he'd even gone so far as to sleep in his own room, just to make sure she got a little rest. Colin was going to have to put his foot down with his mother. It was nice to see the Ton so taken with Augusta, but it couldn't be allowed to devour her whole. He set down his empty glass and strode across the room toward his mother. As soon as this dance was over, he was taking Augusta home. His mother could come with them or not.

"Lord Hutton needs to speak with you." Darius' voice whispered low in Colin's ear. "Out on the terrace."

"Blast it." In the last few days there had been some rumors of problems with one of Colin's old contacts in France. He'd been spending far too much time consulting with his former spymaster, time he'd meant to spend with his bride.

Colin made his way out to the shadowed terrace of Lord Merriweather's mansion, lit a cheroot and waited beneath an ornamental maple tree. A few moments later, his former mentor was by his side.

"I need you to go to Dover tonight," Hutton whispered. "Langston will explain en route. There are too many people here."

"I was about to leave," Colin replied. "My wife isn't feeling well."

"Then send her home with your mother," the older man ordered. "This is important, damn it."

"Very well." Colin waited while the other man slipped away then ground his half-

smoked cheroot out under his heel. As he moved back to the path, a familiar and annoying giggle brought him up short.

“There you are, darling. I’ve been trying to get you to myself for positively ages.”

Colin gritted his teeth and tried to step around the woman blocking his path. “I’m married, Celia, in case you hadn’t heard. Not in the market for your services any longer.” Actually, the widow’s overblown charms had bored him after the first two weeks, but he’d let the affair continue through most of the previous season before presenting her with a diamond brooch and taking his leave.

“Married? To that little county bumpkin? Oh please. You must be bored senseless trying to do your husbandly duty.” She moved up closer to Colin and brushed her lips against his ear. “Come by my house later tonight and I’ll show you a good time. We were always so very good together.”

Her heavy perfume and affected laugh made his stomach clench. But it was the gasp he heard from behind her that struck him like a falling tree, nearly knocking the breath from his chest.

“Augusta.” He caught the sight of her yellow gown as she dashed back into the house. Pushing Celia aside, he gave chase only to be caught by Darius the moment he reentered the ballroom.

“My carriage is waiting,” Dare said. “I’ve told your mother you won’t be leaving with them. We need to go, now. There’s a ship arriving in Dover tonight and your man is supposedly on it.”

“Oh hell.” Colin prayed that Augusta would let him explain when he arrived home.

“Let’s go.”

* * * * *

Dawn had already broken over the horizon when Colin trudged up the steps to his front door. They’d captured the spy and, with Colin’s identification of the man, his days as a threat to England were over. Now all he had to do was try to salvage his marriage.

He went first to his own bedroom to change out of his bedraggled evening clothes and stopped short at the sight of Augusta, curled up and sound asleep in the big wing chair by the dwindling fire. She’d changed into her nightgown and was wrapped in a large

tartan shawl, faded and worn. When Colin slumped into the chair across from her, her large brown eyes flew open wide.

"I wasn't sure you were coming home," she said, rubbing her eyes. "You've never been this late before."

"I'm sorry..." he began.

Augusta shrugged. "The children and I are leaving for Scotland tomorrow. I won't stay here and be pitied, Colin. I just wanted you to know that."

"Leaving?" He stared in shock – he hadn't imagined she would go that far – literally or figuratively for that matter. "You can't leave."

"I know you're an honorable man, Colin. You set your duty ahead of your own wants and needs, which is admirable if a little daunting to those of us who are mere mortals. You didn't have to marry me, but you did. I even believe that you meant to stay true to your vows. But I can't compete with that woman. She's sophisticated and lovely while I'm simply a sturdy Scotswoman, whose greatest skill is stretching a penny into copper wire."

"Augusta, that isn't true..."

She held up a hand. "I know what I look like. I'm too curvaceous, too plain and I can't see more than a few feet without my spectacles – the new ones arrived today, by the way – thank you for that on top of everything else. But even if I'm no diamond, I do have some pride. I can't stay here and watch you have an affair with another woman."

"It isn't what you think," he said wearily. "On my honor, that encounter in the garden was the first time I've seen Celia Warden since we came to Town. I've no interest in her, and if you'd listened a moment more you'd have heard me tell her so, quite bluntly. For God's sake, Augusta, it's you I love. Why the hell would I want anything to do with a tramp like that when I have you?"

"You...what?" He watched her throat work as she swallowed hard. Her hands clenched down on the arms of her chair. She shook her head. "You've never said a word...you've barely spoken to me since we arrived in London."

"I love you, Augusta MacLeish Fordyce. I think I have since I opened my eyes and saw you looking down at me. There's no other woman for me, not now, not ever. 'Til death do us part, remember?"

“But you’ve been gone so much – and you’ve never said anything to make me think you wanted more than a normal marriage – the kind where we only come together in the bedroom or the dinner table.” She bit her lower lip and Colin wanted nothing more than to kiss it and make all her pain go away.

Instead, he leaned against the other chair, watching her intently as he began to explain. “It never occurred to me that you didn’t know. I see you as beautiful, Augusta. I always have. Any man would be lucky to have you for a bride. Honestly, it never occurred to me that you’d doubt that.”

“So, where were you tonight – if you don’t mind my asking?” He could see the doubt warring with hope in her beautiful brown eyes and it shamed him that it was there because of his neglect.

“I was...working. You were right about me putting duty before anything else and this was a commitment I’d made long before we met. Before I inherited the earldom, I used to do some work for the Foreign Office. Occasionally, I still consult with my former employers and tonight was one of those nights. I’m not supposed to tell anyone about this, even you. But I trust you, with my life as well as my honor. I’ve been working for the last several nights to help identify a spy and tonight he was arrested. None of my time has been spent with other women, I promise you. And I’ve informed my superiors that my service is now ended. From now on, my first and foremost duty is to be the best husband I can be to you. I will never, ever break our marriage vows, my love. You’re the only woman for me, now and forever.”

“I see.” She nodded gravely then turned to stare into the fire. Then she smiled. “You’re a very good man, Colin. I’m sorry I doubted you. You have my word to never speak of this to anyone. Just as you have my word that I will never break our marriage vows either. I’d assumed you already knew that.”

“Thank you – and of course I did, although I’d expected you to trust me in that regard in return. More importantly, I meant what I just said, dearest. I do love you, with all my heart. Do you think you can ever manage to return that love, even a little?”

The tiny laugh that bubbled out of her throat was the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard. “A little? Oh you poor, deluded man. I’ve been head over ears in love with you since the day we met. When you married me, I considered myself the luckiest woman in

the world.”

“Thank God.” Without even realizing he’d moved, he found himself on his knees in front of her chair, his arms going around her waist. She hugged him back, sliding down into his lap, her legs straddling his thighs, the hot, damp flesh of her mound rubbing against his engorged member, inflaming him even through their clothes.

They kissed, frantically, mouths and tongues dueling in furious need to absorb the other’s touch. Moments later, her hands scrabbled at the buttons of his trousers and he pulled her nightgown up over her head. Once his cock was free, he lifted her up then lowered her to impale herself on him. God, she was already slick and open for him—he slipped inside with ease. As soon as he was seated, her inner muscles gripped him snugly. He palmed both her breasts, kneading them lightly. His calloused palms rasped against her diamond-hard nipples. She was so responsive that he felt her walls tighten around his shaft each time he squeezed. With their mouths fused, she rode him to a swift, heady climax, her nails digging into his skin as she shattered around him. Her spasms triggered his own and he poured long ribbons of seed into her welcoming body, filling her with his essence as well as the heart she already owned.

Long moments later, he lifted her and carried her to his bed then swiftly stripped off his clothes and joined her beneath the covers. “Now get some rest, my lady. You’ve seemed so exhausted lately, I feel guilty for depriving you of even an hour’s sleep. You’re not ill, are you?”

“Oh yes,” she sighed into his shoulder. “I meant to tell you about that. It’s perfectly normal for me to be tired, darling. It will pass in a few months.”

“In a few months?” Terror gripped him by the throat, stronger than any he’d ever felt, even when fighting for his life. “What the hell is wrong with you, woman?”

She laughed softly. “Not a thing. We’re having a baby, you nit.”

A baby? Relief, joy and even more terror flooded Colin as he pulled her more snugly into his arms and buried his face in her hair. His entire world was right here in his arms. He didn’t even care that there were tears on his cheeks. “I love you, Augusta. I truly am the happiest man in the world.”

“Mm.” She kissed his chest and snuggled up sleepily. “Love you too, Colin. Love you too.”

About the Author

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. Her degrees are in zoology and she currently works in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in southern Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, a lizard and various other small creatures, all of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

Cindy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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